THE

PROTESTANT EPISCOPAL PULPIT.

SERMON BY THE REV. NATHANIEL S. WHEATON, D. D.

VOL. IV.] December, 1834. NO. XII.

HAPPINESS OR MISERY THE RESULT OF CHOICE.

A Sermon,

BY THE REV. NATHANIEL S. WHEATON, D. D.

PRESIDENT OF WASHINGTON COLLEGE, HARTFORD, CONNECTICUT.

Galatians vi. 7, 8.—"*Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap. For he that soweth to his flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption; but he that soweth to the Spirit, shall of the Spirit reap life everlasting.*"

In the practical and ordinary concerns of life, it is observable that men are rarely guilty of the absurd reasoning implied in the reproof contained in the text. There is usually a connexion, more or less obvious, between their premises and conclusions, a studious accommodation of the means to the end; and he would be justly chargeable with folly who anticipated great and happy results without a previous combination of the means and causes which are found by experience necessary to produce them.

But in regard to the consideration of faith and repentance, and a course of exemplary and self-denying piety, as connected with the interests of a life to come, and a necessary means of securing the approbation of God; here, the wisdom of the wise often appears no better than foolishness; and we confidently indulge the most unwarrantable expectations, that our Maker will overlook a whole life of waywardness and error; will crown us with a wreath of victory where no battle has been fought,

and reward us for achievements which we have never in fact attempted.

To dissipate a delusion which cannot but be attended with the most unhappy consequences, and to impress on the minds of the rash and unthinking, a caution they too easily forget, he has taken care solemnly to forewarn us of the consequences of this common error, and in language well calculated to awaken attention. "Be not deceived; God is not mocked." In other words—There are certain errors of the judgment which occasion but little harm; but this is not of the number: it will be felt in its consequences through the ages of an endless existence; therefore, take heed. The unusually serious tone of the warning would also seem to imply, that self-deception here was no uncommon error—that we are peculiarly apt to indulge in unfounded hopes, and to lay the flattering unction to our souls, that all will be well at last, when we may really be sunk in the stagnation of indifference,—the lethargy of death.

What, then, is the weighty truth, which it was thought proper to announce with all this caution and solemnity? Why it is one which instantly commends itself to the understanding of every man; and although expressed in a figure, is not liable to be misunderstood. "Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he reap. For he that soweth to his flesh, shall of the flesh reap corruption; but he that soweth to the Spirit, shall of the Spirit reap life everlasting." In other words, your reward will be in all respects answerable to the nature of the choice you make, and the purposes for which you live. If it be gain, pleasure, folly, or any other mere worldly passion which engrosses you, this is sowing to the flesh; and you can anticipate nothing but a harvest of vain regrets and painful retrospections. The objects which you sought with so much avidity, will have all perished with the using; the time for making a new trial will have gone by; "the harvest is passed, the summer is ended, and you are not saved." But if you have "sown to the Spirit;" if you have been supremely desirous of leading a life of faith on the Son of God, of clothing yourself with the virtues and graces of the christian character, of cultivating those fruits which are peculiarly the

growth of the spirit ; in that case also, the harvest will be answerable to the nature of the seed. Inward consolation, and joy, and peace in the Holy Ghost, will attend you all the days of your pilgrimage ; and you will reap the fruits of present holiness by attaining everlasting life in the end. Thus, has God established an unalterable connexion between the choice we make in the present world, and the issue of that choice in the world to come. The term of our natural life is the seed-time of our existence ; and the harvest is the final recompense of reward. Worldliness and sin will as certainly lead to misery, as the efforts of religious virtue will be crowned with happiness.

Such we understand to be the simple principle announced in the text ; a principle so entirely consonant to the appointments of Providence in the present world, that we can scarcely look abroad without seeing it exemplified. May we not then consider Jehovah as addressing us in the language he once used to his chosen people : "Behold I have set before thee this day life and good, and death and evil : a blessing if ye obey the commandments of the Lord your God ; and a curse if ye will *not* obey the commandments of the Lord your God, but turn aside out of the way which I command you." And may we not add, in view of the immeasurable interests involved in the choice,—take heed that ye be not deceived ?

The subject, thus stated, offers two points for our consideration, which will be discussed in their natural order.

I. It is asserted in the *first* place, "that he that soweth to the flesh, shall of the flesh reap corruption."—In other words, he who devotes himself supremely to the acquisition of any mere temporal good, however successful he may be in the pursuit, will discover at lasti ts utter insufficiency to yield the satisfaction he expected from it, and be doomed to feel the pangs of disappointed hope. The man of Uz uttered the same sentiment, when he declared, as the result of his experience, that "they who plough iniquity, and sow wickedness, reap the same;" and the wise man's remark, that "the wicked work a *deceitful* work : but to him that soweth righteousness shall be a sure reward ;" is an affirmation of the same general truth, that whatever ob-

jects we select, and pursue with eagerness, in the possession of them, and them only, we must look for our whole recompense. Irreligion and vice are sure to produce nothing but misery in the end; and piety will certainly conduct the righteous man to happiness. And it is as impossible to change this eternal relation of cause and effect, as to root up from its deep foundations any other part of the established order of nature.

Yet, obvious as this truth may be, it is certain that men are in general but little guided by it, in the selection of the objects of their desire. Their accustomed sagacity in relation to their temporal affairs often fails them in the higher concerns of eternity; and the unalterable connexion between the end and the means is strangely overlooked.

In illustration of this idea—for it is of too much practical consequence to be stated as a naked proposition, let it be supposed that the worldliness which, in some form or other, constitutes the universally besetting sin, takes the shape of an inordinate passion for riches. I do not intend by this, an industrious pursuit of wealth as a means of doing good, which is condemned by no law of God or man; but that covetousness which the apostle condemns as idolatry,—an intense devotion to it as the *chief* good. Now what is your ultimate purpose? To what reward do you look as a compensation for the slavery of body and spirit, which you daily undergo? You are adding house to house, and field to field; all the reasonable demands of nature were satisfied long ago; but the passion still subsists in full vigour; it even grows more craving by what it feeds on. You must have an object in all this; and what is it? Evidently it is nothing but the gratification of a propensity, for which you are yourselves at a loss to account. You are simply "sowing unto the flesh;" you have placed the *chief* good in the delightful contemplation of a still accumulating mass; and are happy, in proportion as the treasure increases.

Now, it is possible that God may see fit to gratify this favourite passion; in which case, you have all that you sought for. Contemplate the golden image with increasing delight: let the thoughts of it inspire your dreams, as it occupies your waking

hours : but, should it all turn to corruption in the end, and emptiness and vanity be written on the pedestal, you will have no right to complain. God forewarned you not to be deceived ; he gave you your choice between life and good, and death and evil ; and if you find to your sorrow, that " whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he reap," you knew beforehand that it would be so. You may indeed learn, that " death is bitter to the man who lives at ease in his possessions ;"—that it is " a sore evil," that " as he came forth from his mother's womb, naked shall he return to go as he came, and shall take nothing of his labour which he may carry away in his hand ;" but what of that ? You have had your reward. God gave you your heart's desire ; he gave you the riches you coveted more than any thing else : and if they have all " turned to corruption, and the rust thereof should eat your flesh as it were fire," you knew all this before, and have no reason to be dissatisfied.

Let it be supposed, again, that the worldliness is of a more general character ; that it comprehends all or any of the ideas implied by the " the lusts of the flesh, the lusts of the eye, and the pride of life ;" any thing, in short, which interposes between you, and the one thing, pre-eminently needful to the future well-being of an immortal soul. The world you now inhabit, has your whole heart ;—your choicest treasures are here ; you are supremely devoted to its occupations, its pleasures, its enjoyments, meagre as they are ; you would be content to live among them for ever ;—they constitute all your happiness. It is possible again that God may see fit to indulge your wishes ; may cast your lot in a pleasant place, and give you a goodly heritage; bless your labours with increase, satisfy you with health and long life, and the utmost means of enjoyment; remove evil far from you, and suffer no plague to come nigh your dwelling. You have, then, your reward. If your peace has been invaded at times with certain apprehensions, that a life like this was not altogether worthy of an immortal creature ; if you have had your misgivings lest you should come far short of a better inheritance, when all these things shall pass away and be dissolved, still, you have chosen the good that now is ; you

have sought it constantly, and with success. Then it would be folly to expect any thing more. You have sown to the flesh, and have reaped the harvest ; but if it should turn to corruption, and leave you joyless and desponding when all the glittering pageantry of life is fading away, you will remember that a warning voice was raised to tell you that this must be the end thereof. And if, when the time arrives for you to return naked as you came into the world, strong fears should possess you lest you had chosen a foolish part, and you should cry earnestly unto God, that he would minister to you an abundant entrance into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Saviour; what can you hope for but the well-merited rebuke,—Son, remember thou in thy life-time receivedst thy good things? I gave thee all thou *desiredst*; I gave thee thy wages—those wages on which thy heart was set, and which thou knowedst would be all thy reward.

These examples will serve to illustrate the truth asserted in the text. They convey a lesson to all, whom the world is deceiving by promising more than it can possibly perform ; that on whatever objects they fix their choice, in the possession and enjoyment of them alone will they have their reward. If they sow unto the flesh, they can expect to reap corruptible things only ; the justice of God will award them nothing more.

II. It is asserted in the *second* place, and in contradistinction to the truth we have been considering, that "he that soweth unto the Spirit, shall of the Spirit reap life everlasting." It must be unnecessary to prove the truth of an affirmation which none are disposed to deny. If there be any who doubt whether an ungodly life may not, through some happy weakness in the divine character, lead to heaven ; all admit that a life of faith and holiness will certainly conduct to that issue. But it is necessary to guard against mistakes ; to remember the caution, "be not deceived ;" to ascertain clearly who are, and who are not, entitled to the promise, that they shall "reap everlasting life." The apostle is supposed to liken the human constitution to a field into which seed is cast, and which brings forth fruit according to the nature and measure of the seed ; and to show, by this similitude, the unalterable connexion between vice and misery

on the one hand, and between holiness and happiness on the other, in the world to come. The phrase seems designed to express the replenishing the soul with religious affections ; with love to God and man ; with that kind of knowledge which the Spirit of God has revealed, and which is able to make one wise unto salvation. And whoever seriously addresses himself to this duty shall, of the Spirit,—from this cultivation of his moral and intellectual powers, with spiritual graces and divine knowledge, reap life everlasting.

Now, all who have given this subject a moment's serious attention, have probably flattered themselves that, in some way or other, they will become partakers of everlasting life. The idea is too congenial to the natural feeling of self-love, and the desire of self-preservation, to be surrendered for the gloomy alternative of a perpetual banishment from the divine presence : but may we not inquire, whether you are not expecting to reap where you have not sown ? In other words, do you not hope to attain the end without using the means ? Have you the heavenly dispositions, which would enable you to take delight in the employments of the celestial country ? Were you sanctified in youth ; and have you been walking religiously in good works ever since ? Have you ever been really brought into a serious and devout frame of mind ;—practically convinced of your sinfulness, and taken refuge in the atonement of your Saviour ? Do you love him, and love his work, and hate every evil way ? Do you delight in the ordinances of his house,—those prayers and praises which he loves to hear from unfeigned lips,—those sacraments, in which a continual remembrace is made of the atonement ? Can you speak experimentally of the pleasures of religion ? Have you proved to your satisfaction that there are in it joys unspeakable, and full of glory ?

Let us, for a moment, assume the other alternative ; that neither in childhood, nor at any subsequent age, have any permanent religious impressions been made on your minds. All this time you have been walking in the way of your own heart ; you have been sowing unto the flesh ; you have been pursuing the business or amusements of a world that passeth away, to

the neglect of the great interests of eternity; putting on the forms of godliness, when you enter the sanctuary, but retaining all the spirit of the world in your hearts; sometimes giving a compelled attention to the services of religion, at others, unable to keep your thoughts under the least control; always delaying your approach to the Lord's table till "a more convenient season,"—till more plans have been executed,—till age and infirmity have rendered life joyless;—delaying repentance, prayer, every thing which bears on the everlasting welfare of the soul, so long as the current of life flows smoothly on, and you rejoice in the hope of length of days: can you, with all or most of these marks of an ungodly and an unsanctified character, still cherish the delusive dream, that you will die the death of the righteous, and partake of the glory that shall be revealed? Is this sowing unto the Spirit? What is it then to sow unto the flesh? If this be spiritual mindedness, what is it to have a carnal mind? If they, whose characters answer to this description, are to reap life everlasting, who shall reap corruption?

It appears from these observations, that a choice is set before the sons of men; and that of the two alternatives, every one who lives within the sound of the gospel, is actually pursuing the one or the other. There is a way that leadeth unto life; and there is a way that goeth down to the chambers of death; and through the one or the other, each member of the human family is moving on to his destiny. He may choose to disregard the fact now; he may forget it, in the whirl of business or the tumult of pleasure; but there is a sleepless one above, who looks down upon his footsteps, and records them all in the book of his remembrance. He sees, though we cannot, the separating line which divides the company of the faithful from the company of the unholy; and is silently preparing for them a reward suited to their various characters.

What a subject of reflection is here presented to the votaries of pleasure and gain, the two ruling passions which divide the children of this world! While they are devoting all the energies of immortal minds to the pursuit of that which is essentially corruptible, and destined to perish in the using; or dissi-

pating them in amusements, on which not even wealth and refinement can confer dignity ; little do they dream that they are scattering seeds, which, like the fabled teeth of the dragon, are one day to spring into a harvest, which they will contemplate with shuddering and dismay ! Can they, in their moments of sober reflection, believe that it will come to good ? Is it not enough to be thus solemnly admonished of the emptiness of the things for which they labour, and of the hopeless disappointment which must follow ;—to be instructed out of the mouth of an apostle, that after all their toil and perplexity ; after all their mortification and self-reproach, in the service of the flesh ; their reward shall be the trembling anticipation of a judgment to come, in which all, and more than all, their worst fears shall be realized ? Why give place for a moment longer to the delusive hope, that God will not be faithful to his word ; that he intends all along to refresh the weary and heavy laden, but still relentless, child of folly and of sin, out of the well-springs of immortal life ; that he will bestow upon him in the world to come those incorruptible treasures, which he, in the days of his sojourning, was bold enough to contemn, or foolish enough to undervalue ? Vain and groundless hope ! as well may we think to change the immutable principles of good and evil, as that a life of vanity and irreligion will terminate otherwise than in evil. The wages of sin is death ; and nothing can reverse the decree.

How animating, on the other hand, to the righteous man, is the assurance, that he will be rewarded for even his few and feeble efforts here to do his Maker's will ! In his contest with the spirit of the world, he is cheered and encouraged by the certain hope, that it will be well for him in the end : while he feels in the consolations that flow down upon him now, the fulfilment of the observation, that " godliness has the promise of the life that now is, as well as of that which is to come." Permit him the whole range of the pleasures which so much delight the children of men, and he will feel no disposition to return to them. Being risen together with Christ, he has entered on a higher style of existence ; and henceforth it is his daily care to seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth at the right hand of God."

PUBLIC WORSHIP.

OBSERVANCE OF THE SABBATH.

"Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy."

WHAT does the word *holy* mean? It cannot be moral rectitude; for time, which is not a responsible agent, is incapable of that. What else does that word mean in the Bible?

The tabernacle was *holy*. It was set apart for its appropriate use in the public worship of God. The vessels and all the furniture of the tabernacle were holy. They were set apart for the same purpose. So, also, of the temple and its furniture. The sacrifices were holy. They were to be used in the public worship of God. The priests were holy. They were set apart to that service. Many "convocations" were holy, when the people were convoked for the worship of God. And generally, in the Old Testament, the word *holy* is used in such connexions. We do not now recollect any instance, in which any thing was called holy, on account of its appropriation to the purpose of *secret* worship. However that may be, we think it will not be denied that the habitual use of the word in the Old Testament is such, that it naturally suggests the idea of public worship.

The command, then, is Remember the Sabbath day, to devote it to public worship, for God, when he had wrought in the work of creation six days, rested on the seventh, and set it apart for that purpose. The observance of the Sabbath, according to this command, therefore, implies the public worship of God; as public as the circumstance of the worshipper render possible.

The efforts which good men have made, for some years past, to secure the observance of the Sabbath, have probably done much good. They have at least stirred up the consciences of Christians, and thus checked the rapidity of our downward career; and in some instances, they have done more than this. Yet it is undeniable, that those efforts have failed to accomplish what was expected from them. The great mass of the community has not been taken hold of, by the arguments and ap-

peals on this subject, as on that of Temperance.—We grant that the efforts in favour of the Sabbath have not been so great, so universal, and so continuous, as those for Temperance; but they have been greater than was required to make Temperance take hold of the public conscience, as the Sabbath has not been made to do; and the want of similar success, from even greater efforts, is the reason why no more has been done; why efforts have been suspended, and societies dissolved. There has been less labour, because the labour expended was found to accomplish less. Whence has this difference arisen?

Doubtless, several causes have combined to produce this result; but we suspect the principal cause has been, the manner in which the subject was presented; the shape of the thought, as it existed in the minds of the writers and speakers, and as they endeavoured to urge it upon other minds. The Sabbath was urged upon men as something negative; as a day on which certain things were not to be done. *Not doing, non-performance*, was urged upon people, for one day in seven, and that was called, keeping the Sabbath. God, in the fourth commandment, first says, Remember to attend public worship on the Sabbath; and then he goes on to forbid that which is inconsistent with a due observance of this command. He fills the mind with something positive, with the idea of a duty to be performed, in the first place, and then prohibits what might hinder its performance. We have, in too great a degree, reversed the order. We have put our negations foremost, trusting that, if we could once get the mind empty and the hands idle, we might afterwards fill and employ them aright. The result has been as should have been expected. The command to *cease doing*, to sink into inaction, to make ourselves, as nearly as we can, into blocks, or stones, does not strike people as a reasonable command. It gets no hold of their consciences. It strikes them as unreasonable, arbitrary, and worthy to be resisted. It is desirable, not to leave their minds for a moment in that state. It is wise, therefore, to put the positive duty, the something to be done, foremost, as God has done, and to let the negations with which the duty is guarded, come afterwards.

We do not suppose that this fault in our efforts has been as

great and glaring in practice, as it is in our description. We are trying to show it through a magnifier, on purpose, that it may be seen the more plainly. Perhaps too, the fault has been less in our language, than in the interpretation which others have unfairly put upon it.—However this may be, we think it certain that our exhortations to Sabbath-keeping have had too much of this aspect, in the eyes of those to whom they have been addressed; and that this is one chief reason why they have accomplished no more. At least, we are sure that this point is worth looking at seriously.

Suppose that our efforts had been crowned with entire success, so that we had prevailed with every man, woman and child in the nation, to abstain from all labour and diversion on the Sabbath, and that this had been all the change effected. What would have been gained? Why, the removal of much visible evil, and the production of a state of intolerable inactivity, from the pain of which some would take refuge in public worship. Suppose on the other hand, that all effort had been directed to promote attendance on public worship, and had been successful. What would have been gained? The end of visible Sabbath-breaking would have been one of the less important benefits of such an effort.

We invite the attention of the friends of the Sabbath to this subject. We hope they will consider, whether experience does not teach the propriety of a change in their mode of operation, and whether that here suggested does not promise well. Indeed, we would invite them to imagine, for a moment, that all the time, and talent, and zeal, and expense, and every form of effort, which have been expended within ten years to promote the observance of the Sabbath, had been expended to promote attendance on public worship; and to ask themselves, what would probably have been the result.

We are not alone in these views. They are entertained by some, to whom the Christian public is accustomed to listen with respect.